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City of Los Altos
Parks and Recreation Commission
Special Meeting: May 20, 2020

Dog Park Subcommittee Report and Recommendations

Report Date: Thursday, May 14, 2020
To: Park and Recreation Commission
From: Commissioners Stuart Eckmann, Teresa Morris, and Scott Spielman
Subject: Dog Park Subcommittee Report and Recommendations

Background

On February 13, 2019, the Los Altos City Council tasked the Los Altos Parks and Recreation Commission (PARC) with conducting comprehensive public outreach in order to determine resident interest for a fenced-in dog park, as well as for off-leash dog hours in public parks. The current Mayor, Jan Pepper, later requested to the Subcommittee, that the process be divided into two proposals: one for a dedicated fenced-in dog park and the other for a shared space, off-leash pilot program. The design of the workshops and the recommendations in this report are consistent with those requests.

The issue of dog parks in Los Altos has been a subject of discussion within the leadership of this City for nearly ten years. In an attempt to thoroughly assess the issue PARC appointed a Dog Park Subcommittee (Subcommittee) to explore ways to conduct thorough public outreach and analysis. The Subcommittee was formed in August 2019 and consisted of Stuart Eckmann and Scott Spielman. In February of 2020, Teresa Morris was added to the Subcommittee. This report and its recommendation is the product of the collective views of the Subcommittee.

In addition to the current subcommittee efforts there was a previous dog park PARC subcommittee. That Subcommittee consisted of Mike Ellerin, Tanya Lindermeier and Grace Lilygren. There was also a 2018 Dog Park survey.

City Council also requested that the PARC work with City staff to conduct the public workshops. The Subcommittee commends the work of staff, particularly Donne Legge and Trevor Marsden, as well as the rest of the recreation staff. They were invaluable in conducting the workshops, compiling the data from the workshops and collecting public inputs through petitions, surveys and emailed correspondence between August 2019 and February 2020. The Subcommittee appreciates the efforts of residents in the information they gathered and provided, as well.

PARC, along with staff, did extensive public outreach. Mailings were sent to residents that live within 1000 feet of each of the proposed dog park sites. Other outreach efforts included:

- Signs in all parks (not just the parks under consideration for dog parks)
- Paid ad and press release in Town Crier
- Flyers distributed and posted through the city
- Facebook

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- Instagram
- Nextdoor.com
- Neighborhood leaders were sent informational emails

The Subcommittee recommendations are based to a large extent on the dog park workshops. However, all input from residents were considered, including surveys, petitions, emails, letters and public comments at PARC meetings were assessed. In February 2020, PARC and City Staff conducted 4 dog park workshops over a period of two days. The first set of two were conducted on a Wednesday evening at the Garden House in Shoup Park. The other set of two workshops were held two weeks later on a Saturday morning at Grant Park. Details of the workshops and the additional resident input are contained in the staff report.

Additional Information that contributed to the recommendations in this report:

According to Palo Animal Control, there are over 3,800 licensed dogs in the city of Los Altos. Given that there are 10,700 residences in the city, between 35 and 40% of the homes in the city have dogs. (The range given is imprecise because some homes have multiple dogs and some dog owners do not have licenses for their dogs.)

Los Altos has limited parkland (45.2 acres) and limited parks, of which perhaps 8 or 9 provide the conditions to support areas for dogs. The parks are heavily used for sports and other activities and this presents scheduling challenges. As a result of having fewer parks and less open space, it is a challenge to find ideal hours for any type of Dog Park in the city.

Neighboring cities, including Cupertino, Los Altos Hills, Mountain View, Palo Alto and Sunnyvale have dog parks.

Residents of Los Altos frequently drive to other cities to use the dog parks in those cities.

Given this background and information, the following are the recommendations of the dog park subcommittee.

Proposal for a Dedicated Fenced-in Dog Park

McKenzie Park Location Discussion:

Initially, staff recommended that McKenzie Park be considered for a fenced-in dog park. The Subcommittee noted that there were some problems in recommending that site:

For example, substantial capital investment would be necessary to make McKenzie Park functional as a fenced-in dog park. Hardscape would need to be removed, some trees would need to be removed, drainage would need to be improved and fencing would need to be extensive to enclose the irregular area of this park.

In addition, there was concern for the impact to trees from dog urine and resulting necessary watering. Also, protective fencing would be required for a number of the trees. Parking is also an issue due to the site being frequently full of vehicles during the day. Caterpillars, potentially harmful

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to dogs, are abundant in the months of April and May in this park. Although all parks in Los Altos face this potential infestation issue, it is a particular issue for the McKenzie Park site because the proposed fenced-in dog park would be located directly under the trees that are most infested with the caterpillars. Furthermore, a fenced-in dog park at this location would remove resident access to a play structure as well as public benches and picnic tables. Finally, and importantly, the data from the workshops do not support having a fenced-in dog park at this site.

Therefore, given these considerations and the negative impacts that would result from making a portion of the park a fenced-in dog park site, the Subcommittee does not recommend a fence-in dog park at this location. Furthermore, the recent financial constraints on the City budget, as a direct result of the Corona virus, also gives reason to reject a fenced-in dog park at McKenzie Park.

Lincoln Park Location Discussion

Subsequently, and in response to the direction from City Council for PARC to recommend a site for a fenced-in dog park, the subcommittee decided to consider one other option for a location. An evaluation was made of South Lincoln Park, an approximate 22,000 square foot area that was mostly unused and had low traffic volume and ample parking. Drawbacks to this alternative became evident. It made no sense to dedicate a large part of this park to a fenced-in dog park. It would be giving up too much open space. A smaller area of about 7,000 divided into two areas – one for small dogs and one for large dogs was considered. This still results in removing a third of the park from general public uses.

The City was provided with an additional source of input via a large petition in support of a fenced-in dog park at south Lincoln Park. However, those residents did not participate in any significant degree in the workshops, during PARC meetings or via writing to advocate for a dog park at south Lincoln Park. Therefore, the Subcommittee does not recommend proceeding with a fenced-in dog park at this location.

The City of Los Altos conducted a survey in 2018. The outcome of that survey had a number of participants in favor of a fenced-in dog park. However, the survey was not scientific in its methodology. Unlike the workshops, it lacked controls to allow for the separation of resident versus non-resident input. In addition, there was no control for duplication of voting.

Based on the workshops, there is consistent opposition to a dedicated fenced-in park in Los Altos.

One other data point was a City sponsored survey, conducted in 2018. It found that respondents preferred Lincoln Park between Edith and University (33%) for a fenced-in dog park. This survey also revealed desires for fenced-in parks at Grant, Hillview and Heritage Oaks Parks. However, based on the significant resident input through the dog park workshops results, the Subcommittee does not recommend that location or any others for a fenced-in dog park in Los Altos.

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Proposal for Off-Leash sites at two locations as a pilot program

Staff recommended two sites for off-leash hours that would be shared with other resident uses. PARC chose to support staff recommendations. The Subcommittee supports the concept of shared space, given that there is limited park space in our city. These two sites are: The Hillview Baseball Field and Heritage Oaks Park.

This would be a pilot program for a specific timeframe. The Subcommittee recommends 6-9 months in duration after the program begins. The 6-9-month period is exclusive of any closure due to any field maintenance. At the end of that timeframe, an updated report is recommended to City Council by current PARC subcommittee members and staff to determine if the pilot program should be extended or implemented permanently.

The Hillview Baseball Field Location Discussion

This site has a number of time limitations. It is used for baseball 7 months of the year and it is closed, as all parks in Los Altos are, for 2-1/2 months of the year, per staff, for field maintenance. However, the Subcommittee recommends this location because it received strong support in the dog park workshops. The Hillview Baseball Field is currently available weekday mornings and after baseball activities in the weekday evenings. It is also currently available on weekend evenings.

The Subcommittee recommends that dog owners be limited to the grass area and not allow their dogs to run on the infield to preserve the infield's condition. Appropriate signage needs to include this restriction.

Furthermore, the Subcommittee recommends that morning weekday hours continue until 10 am on the days the Field is not being used (refer to hour and timetable below). The hours below will not interfere with other activities in the park and will allow people who prefer to walk later, or who have school drop off conflicts to enjoy the location more fully.

Recommended hours for the off-leash use of Hillview Baseball Field are as follows:

Any adjustments deemed necessary by staff, to hours for the park schedule should be done in conjunction with the dog park Subcommittee.

Morning Hours

Days	Months	Off-Leash hours Start	Off-Leash Hours End
M, T, Th, Fr	Feb thru Jul	7:00AM	10:00AM
Sun, Wed, Sat	Feb Thru Jul	7:00AM	9:00AM
Sun-Sat ¹	Aug thru Jan	7:00AM	10:00AM

1. Except 7:00-9:00AM on Wed, Aug thru Oct

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Afternoon/Evening hours

Days	Months	Off-Leash hours Start	Off-Leash Hours End
Sat, Sun	Feb thru Jul	5:00PM	Sunset
Sat, Sun	Aug thru Jan	4:00PM	Sunset
Mon-Fri	Feb thru Oct	7:00PM	Sunset
Mon-Fri	Nov thru Jan	4:00PM	Sunset

Heritage Oaks Park Location Discussion

The second location that staff recommended as an off-leash hours site is Heritage Oaks Park. PARC supports this recommendation.

Off leash dogs should be prohibited within 25 feet, or whatever distance staff recommends, of the picnic table areas.

Dogs must be restricted from the creek area adjacent to the park.

The Subcommittee strongly recommends that these restrictions be clearly displayed on the main signage and strictly enforced by Animal Control and Los Altos Police.

Hours recommended for Heritage Oaks Park

Any adjustments deemed necessary by staff, to hours for the park schedule should be done in conjunction with the dog park Subcommittee.

Morning Hours:

Days	Months	Off-Leash hours Start	Off-Leash Hours End
Sun-Fri	Sept thru Jun	7:00AM	10:00AM
Sat	Sept thru Jun	7:00AM	9:00AM
Mon-Fri	July thru Aug	7:00AM	9:00AM
Sat-Sun	July thru Aug	7:00AM	10:00AM

Afternoon/Evening hours

Days	Months	Off-Leash Hours Start	Off-Leash Hours End
Mon-Fri	January thru December	5:30PM	Sunset
Sun-Sat	Apr thru Oct	5:30PM	Sunset
Sun-Sat	Nov thru Mar	4:00PM	Sunset

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Comments about Hours for Off- Leash Hours Locations:

As noted above, Heritage Oaks and Hillview, like most parks in Los Altos, are well used. Therefore, providing a balance between the scheduled activities and consistent hours is a challenge. One option is to have the same set hours for both parks that are more limited and the other is to offer as many hours for off leash dog owners possible. The Subcommittee chose the latter.

Resident Concerns

Heritage Oaks Park has a particular challenge in that it is directly adjacent to a row of houses. Hillview Baseball Field is similar. PARC received comments during the workshop and via the submitted comment cards, that residents adjacent to Heritage Oaks Park are concerned about the noise level. Taking this into account, PARC recommends that morning hours at this park and the Hillview Baseball Field do not begin until 7 am. It is our recommendation that the needs and desires of dog owners be balanced with the needs of residents and that all parties share the precious parkland that we have in our city. The Subcommittee recommends that any noise issues be considered as part of the post off-leash trial period discussion.

Monitoring and Evaluation for off-leash locations

Monitoring and evaluation is necessary.

The Subcommittee recommends the following procedures for public comment:

1. Allow the public to submit an email via a City address for emails and hard copy letters to be sent or dropped off with comments.
2. Set up an online comment form that requires name and address in order to fill out the form. Comments with names and addresses will be considered for evaluation for the pilot program. Comments will also be accepted via mail and walk in.
3. The submitted comments will be compiled reviewed by both staff and the Subcommittee.

Animal Control and Los Altos Police will patrol off-leash locations to ensure people are following the rules.

City staff and the Subcommittee will also monitor reports from Animal Control and Los Altos Police Department.

In addition, the Subcommittee suggests that dog owners organize to form a group of Los Altos residents to monitor the dog issues at the parks and to report them to the Subcommittee.

Dog owners and residents should report all incidents.

Staff should report to the Subcommittee any concerns they might have on a monthly basis.

Note: This is not to be considered a complete list. Moving forward, staff and the Subcommittee will work together to provide a complete list.

Dog Owner Responsibilities

- Dog owners will pick up after their dogs, keep their dogs in the designated areas, report any incidents, and avoid tearing up the grass, particularly on wet days.
- Dog owners must control the noise both they and their dogs generate, particularly before 8 am but also be aware of excess noise at all times.
- Dog owners need to be aware that this is a trial program and could be suspended if they do not take proper care of the parks.
- Dog owners must keep their dogs out of the nearby creek and yards and designated children's' play areas.
- Dog owners must abide by the hours and all rules provided by signage
- All dogs must licensed
- Dogs must be under voice control
- Limit of two dogs per human companion
- All dogs must have an ID tag and collar, or harness and owner must be in possession of a leash.
- Hours for dogs must be strictly honored
- Incidents must be reported per signage instructions

Note: This list may be expanded per staff and the Subcommittee.

Per the October 16, 2019 Staff Report, the estimate for the off-leash parks for signage, dog bags, etc. is \$7,100 per park.

Review of the Data from the Workshops

Data collected from the workshops, shows some support for fenced-in dog parks, as well as some opposition to off-leash hours. Comment cards from the workshops are consistent with these sentiments as well.

Support for fenced-in dog parks at one or both of the suggested locations, either Lincoln Park or McKenzie Park, was 38.9% of the 288 respondents. Specific to McKenzie, the support was 10.1% and for Lincoln Park the support was 6.6%. Conversely, an additional 8.3% responded no to the chosen locations but yes, to fenced-in elsewhere in Los Altos. Opposition to the suggested fenced-in locations was a majority at 52.8%.

Off-leash hours results showed the majority of respondents, 63% of the 284 respondents, support off-leash hours at one or both of the locations. Conversely, opposition to off-leash Hillview Baseball Field and Heritage Oaks Park was 9.5%. In addition, 27.5% completely opposed off leash hours *at any park* in Los Altos.

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For complete workshop statistics, see the Dog Park Workshop Results Staff Report (3a).

Note: The number of workshop participants represents about 1% of the Los Altos population.

How long should the pilot program run?

The Subcommittee believes that 6-9 months should be sufficient to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. The 6-9-month period is exclusive of any closure due to any field maintenance.

The COVID-19 Virus - The COVID-19 virus has created uncertainty with respect to the timing of the implementation of the pilot off-leash program. It appears that it may be possible for dogs to be infected with the COVID virus and cause the infection of other dogs or humans. This needs to be factored into the timing of the pilot program, as do the same social distancing requirements already in place. It is crucial for PARC, as well as all staff, to stay abreast of the news regarding transmission via human to animal and animal to human as we move forward. If at any point, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends closing off leash hours down, the City of Los Altos should act swiftly and decisively to do so. The City should consult, as necessary, with the Santa Clara County health Department as well.

COVID-19 Considerations - Public Health Issues.

The selection of potential sites for off-leash and fenced-in areas, as well as the City workshops, were all done prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, shelter-in-place orders, and guidelines for social distancing. The CDC have indicated that dogs and cats may become infected with the virus that causes COVID-19, and they are currently advising people to refrain from letting their pets interact with people or other animals outside their own households.

More recent information from Stanford University indicates that the COVID-19 virus can be in solid waste. The risk of dogs getting COVID-19 may be minimal, but it does exist. Whatever risks that exist may also be increased in legal off-leash parks.

Addendum

1. CDC Guidelines

Recent CDC guidelines are included as an addendum to this report, and the Subcommittee may provide updates as needed. As a result of this new information, there could be potential public health issues from sharing areas where dogs urinate and defecate with individuals and families who picnic on the same turf, and whose children play sports on that turf.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/animals.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#COVID-19-and-Animals>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/pets.html>

2. A Potential Alternative Site at Heritage Oaks Park

Subsequent to public workshop input and the implementation of COVID-19 advisories and the shelter-in-place order, the Subcommittee discussed how and where another off-leash area could be implemented. If council feels that solid and liquid waste is a risk for the general public in the Covid-19 era an alternative might be to use the undeveloped area of Heritage Oaks Park. However, we believe that most participants in the workshop would have assumed the area to be used would be the grassy area of Heritage Oaks Park. Therefore, this section is separated from the rest of the report. In addition, there is potential that any individual who uses any dog designated area (off leash or fenced-in) is always at risk of exposure to additional dog related diseases.

Potential advantages of having a dedicated off leash area in Heritage Oaks Park include: Minimizing risk for both dogs and humans of contaminating shared turf with dog urine and solid waste; the potential for broader hours of operation; and the potential for better compliance with ADA issues, where a solid substrate would better facilitate wheelchair access.

Potential disadvantages: The close proximity to residential properties; and potential negative impact to a watershed area at the adjacent creek. Furthermore, this would require significantly more capital investment to enable this area to be safe and attractive to both dogs and dog owners. Additionally, this has not been reviewed by staff nor presented to the public and this would take significant time and analysis.

Sharing our discussions of this potential site is not meant to bypass any public input from public discussions, but rather to convey an organically-derived idea.

3. Future Additional Needs for Dog Areas

A) All Bay Area communities are facing housing challenges. The State of California is mandating additional housing units, and the City of Los Altos is addressing this with Accessory Dwelling Units and higher-density multifamily development. Sometimes developers are seeking variances in allowable square footage and setback requirements and incorporating as many units as allowed in order to maximize their returns on investments.

Dogs are, and will continue to be, part of the social and emotional fabric of families. The confluence of higher-density living, an overall decrease in per capita yard size, and the desire for families to include a companion animal, mitigate together to add pressures on our finite park space. As result of the higher density and developer maximization, it would behoove The City of Los Altos to *require* that all future high density development in Los Altos provide park space, including a play space for dogs, as well as a separate play space for children. The dog park in Mountain View at San Antonio Village is a prime example of such a park incorporated into a high-density housing development.

B) If the dog park off leash program is a success, consider creating additional off leash parks per the results of the dog park workshop.